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Revisiting Siraf as a Persian Gulf Commercial Port in the late Sassanian and Early Islamic Period: What Archaeology and Contemporaneous Manuscripts Reveal

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Abstract

One of the major lacunae in middle East studies is a comprehensive account of the economic history of the Persian Gulf. Although there exists considerable documentary material to compile such a history for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of the common Era (CE), studies to date have been limited by their focus on either the Arab or Iranian side of the Persian Gulf and also a tendency to ignore the important cross-gulf trade links that have been dominant features of the region for centuries. Textural evidence from earlier periods is not as extensive, but the extant sources from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries do attest to the presence of significant trading centers along the Persian Gulf coast, especially on the Iranian side extending from the general area of present-day Bushehr to present-day Bandar-e Abbas. Among these cities was Siraf, an important, if not the primary, port for about 100 years before being devastated by an earthquake in 977. Reconstructing the history of siraf is an intellectual task that can contribute to an understanding of trade relations within the Persian Gulf and between this region and Africa and Asia in the period 500 to 1000 CE. This project has moved forward considerably as a results of archaeological excavations that have been on-going at the site of siraf for some 40 years. The objective of this paper is to reassess the archaeological evidence and the contemporaneous textual sources that mention siraf in order to see what they reveal about development and extent of siraf's trade relations.



On the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf, adjacent to the small contemporary village of Bandar-e Taheri, lie the archaeological ruins of Siraf, an important maritime trading center during the early Abbasid era (750-1258 CE) of history. Surviving textual references and descriptions from the tenth century CE suggest that Siraf may have been the most important port in the Persian Gulf for about a 100-year period, ca. 875 to 977 CE. In that latter year, Siraf was devastated by an earthquake. Although the city was rebuilt, at least partially, political changes in the region favored the emergence of Basra as a major port in that late tenth century, and some of Siraf's trade was diverted there, and, it is likely that some of Siraf's merchant families also migrated to Basra and other ports. Subsequently, the Saljuq invasions of Iran during the eleventh century contributed to a disruption of both maritime and overland trade routes. The combination of natural disaster and political developments, both of which were events over which the people of Siraf had no control, effectively prevented the city from recovering its former prosperity. Siraf continued to decline, and by the time of the Mongol invasions of Iran in the thirteenth century, it was largely abandoned.

The history of Siraf—why it developed, its significance as an entrepot, and the reasons for its decline--is important to reconstruct in order to fill the major gaps in our knowledge

about the economic history of the Persian Gulf. Unfortunately, Persian Gulf economic history, at least in terms of the extent of historical documents, seems to begin in the nineteenth century and is tied to European imperialism in the region. It is a history constructed originally by scholars in Britain, the major external power in the Persian Gulf from approximately 1850 to 1950. It thus is a history that is filtered through the lens of British imperial interests. An outstanding example of this “filtering” are the efforts by indigenous Persian Gulf merchants to contest early British attempts to control trade in the nineteenth century: in historical accounts, the indigenous merchants and crews of their ships are transformed into pirates and British military campaigns to conquer the coastal towns are sanitized as crusades against piracy. Although a few Arab scholars have attempted to write “corrective” histories of this period, the dominant historical view of the early nineteenth century Persian Gulf remains that of a region beset by pirates.

As for the earlier period, the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, historical accounts are scant, even though during the sixteenth century Portugal was trying to control trade in the Persian Gulf. Then there is the problem of twentieth century history, especially in the era after the discovery and export of oil. Despite the importance of petroleum, comprehensive



analyses of the Persian Gulf's economy virtually disappear in favor of a focus on either the Arab or Iranian side of the Persian Gulf and also a tendency to ignore the important cross-gulf trade links that have been dominant features of the region for centuries.

Historical texts in Arabic or Persian for the Persian Gulf prior to 1500 are too few, but the extant sources from the Abbasid period, when relative political stability prevailed here, do attest to the presence of significant trading centers along the Persian Gulf coast, especially on the Iranian side extending from the general area of present-day Bushehr to present-day Bandar-e Abbas. For pre-Abbasid history, documentary sources on the Persian Gulf seem to be virtually non-existent, although it is reasonable to assume that the trading patterns that we can reconstruct for the ninth and tenth centuries must be continuations of trade relations first established earlier. Indeed, both archaeological and numismatic evidence from the Sasanian period (ca. 224-642 CE) indicate that well-established, maritime trade routes existed in the region by 500. Siraf already was a port by this time, although its heyday would be some three or four centuries later. Reconstructing the history of Siraf, from its emergence in the late Sasanian period to its decline and abandonment in the late Abbasid period is an intellectual task

that can contribute to an understanding of trade relations within the Persian Gulf and between this region and Africa and Asia in the period 500 to 1100 CE. This project actually has moved forward considerably as a result of archaeological excavations that have been on-going at the site of Siraf for some 40 years. The objective of this paper is to reassess the archaeological evidence and the contemporaneous textual sources that mention Siraf in order to see what they reveal about the development and extent of Siraf's trade relations.

Siraf under the Sasanians, as well as later, extending right to the twentieth century, was part of Fars (Pars, in Sasanian times). It is not possible to state how important Siraf may have been during the Sasanian period. However, the remains of a Sasanian fort have been discovered under the primarily Abbasid ruins of Siraf. In addition, Sasanian coins and pottery fragments that date to the sixth century also have been unearthed there. According to R. Bocharlat and J. F. Salles, Siraf was connected by road to Firuzabad. Such a road connection would be important to facilitate caravan trade with the hinterland. That is, an established route to the inland centers of Fars would stimulate Siraf's merchants to import goods by sea that could be resold. However, it is also true that, based on extant evidence, historians believe that the primary Sasanian port was Bushire.



Whether Siraf was a secondary port or was of lesser importance can not be established based on evidence currently available. The presence of a fort at Siraf may indicate the site was deemed important enough economically to warrant such protective facility. Or it may indicate that the particular site on the Persian Gulf was deemed a good strategic position for a military installation, and Siraf gradually developed after the fort was constructed.

What is more certain from an historical perspective is that Siraf developed as an important port during the Abbasid period. In the extant sources from the early Abbasid period, the first mention one finds of Siraf is in a manuscript by Ibn al-Faqih from the early ninth century. According to Ibn al-Faqih, merchants in Siraf were sending ships to India, although he does not specify how many ships were owned by Sirafi merchants at this time, and without knowing the size of the mercantile fleet, it is difficult to evaluate the port's importance. One such merchant was Abu Zaid (ca. 877-915), who kept a log of where his ships went to trade goods.

The most comprehensive account of Siraf is that written by Istakhri in about 946. By this time, Siraf seems to have emerged as the primary port in the Persian Gulf and also rivaled Shiraz in

terms of the number of its houses. The city seems to have continued to flourish until the earthquake in 977. That some of its major merchant families choose to emigrate following the earthquake, rather than to remain in Siraf and rebuild the city must have contributed to its decline, although it remained an important trading center for the next 100 years.